

VZCZCXRO6181
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSK #0104/01 0331039
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 021039Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5598
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1414
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000104

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/02/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [ETRD](#) [BO](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: BELARUS DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIP WITH IRAN: MOTIVES
UNCLEAR, BUT NOT PURE

REF: 06 MINSK 1234

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (SBU) On January 21 and January 27, the Belarusian Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs held meetings with their Iranian counterparts and the Iranian president in Tehran. Although the Belarusian state media mysteriously ignored the trips, Iranian and independent Belarusian news sources reported that Belarusian and Iranian officials signed memorandums of defense cooperation and agreed to strengthen economic and political bilateral relationships. After the visits, Iran announced that President Ahmadinejad would make a head of state visit to Minsk in the coming months. Independent journalists suspect the two governments made agreements on strengthening Iranian surface to air defense and opening oil fields to Belarusian industries. End summary.

Defense Ministers Strengthen Military Ties

¶2. (U) Belarusian Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev arrived January 21 in Tehran for an official two-day visit with his Iranian counterpart, Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Jannar, and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. All information from the visit came from the Iranian media and Belarusian independent press. The Belarusian state media did not report on the visit. In Maltsev's first meeting with Mohammad-Jannar, the Iranian Minister claimed Belarus enjoyed a "special status" in Iran's foreign policy and, although the two countries did not share borders, their similar point of view on regional and international issues had led to "satisfactory" cooperation. Maltsev called Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko's November 2006 visit to Iran a "turning point" in the development of Belarusian-Iranian ties and expressed confidence that the implementation of agreements signed during the president's visit would bolster bilateral cooperation. Maltsev noted Iran's "special" role in regional and international policies and voiced Belarus' readiness to increase defense cooperation with Iran. Both ministers also exchanged criticism of the West's "dual and discriminatory" policies toward their governments.

¶3. (U) On January 22, Maltsev met Iranian president Ahmadinejad, who reiterated that Iran and Belarus shared identical views on regional and international issues. According to Iranian news sources, Ahmadinejad told Maltsev that Iran and Belarus should use their "abundant" potentials and capabilities to strengthen cooperation. Afterwards,

Maltsev and Mohammad-Najjar signed a memorandum of understanding on military cooperation.

Belarusian Defense Ministry Remains Quiet

¶4. (U) The Belarusian Defense Ministry refused to comment on Maltsev's Iranian visit, particularly on the signed memorandum of understanding. Finally, on January 24, the ministry released a statement claiming that the military agreement with Iran was based on Belarus' national interests and was in strict compliance with international law, including the UN Security Council's December 2006 resolution on Iran's nuclear program. The Ministry on January 25 published the statement in its newspaper "Bo Slavu Rodiniy."

MFA Visits Tehran

¶5. (U) Coming on the heels of Maltsev's trip, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov arrived in Tehran for further meetings with Iranian officials. Similar to Maltsev's visit, the Belarusian state media did not report Martynov's travels. President Ahmadinejad in a January 27 meeting told Martynov that Iran supported Belarus' independence and progress and as two independent states shouldering important roles in the international arena, Iran and Belarus should work hard to remove obstacles to strengthen bilateral relations. Martynov lauded Iran's success in the energy (oil and gas), agriculture, mining, and market and finance spheres and repeated Lukashenko's invitation for Ahmadinejad to visit Minsk.

¶6. (U) Martynov then met with Iranian Minister of Industries

MINSK 00000104 002 OF 002

and Mines Ali Reza Tahmasbi to discuss expanding bilateral economic relations. Tahmasbi stressed the necessity to boost industrial cooperation, hoping that the two countries' economic relationship would soon match that of political relations. The Iranian minister noted the Belarusian production of Samand cars as a symbol of the two countries' cooperation and claimed that Belarus would serve as Iran's gateway to Russian and Ukrainian markets. In a January 27 press conference (also not reported in the Belarusian state press), Martynov noted Iran's membership in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and reiterated that Iran had the same right to peacefully develop nuclear energy as other NPT members. Martynov stressed that negotiation was the only correct solution to any disagreements and recommended countries, particularly the U.S., resume talks with Tehran. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki announced that the Iranian president would make a state visit to Belarus in the coming months.

Independent Speculation On the Visits

¶7. (U) Human rights activist and head of the NGO Charter 97 Andrey Sannikov on January 22 published his commentary on Maltsev's visit on the Charter 97 website. According to Sannikov, Maltsev and his Iranian counterparts likely discussed land to air defense, servicing and updating missile defense systems, weapons trade, and nuclear cooperation.

¶8. (C) In a January 30 meeting with Poloffs, reporter for the independent economic weekly newspaper "Belarusi i Rynok" Aleksandr Alesin theorized that Belarus was seeking partners wherever it could in the face of Western and increasing Russian pressure (ref A). Coming on the heels of the Russian-Belarusian gas and oil crisis, which shows little prospects for Belarus, the GOB was searching for alternative sources of energy, particularly oil. Iran, suffering from Western pressure over its nuclear power program, threats against Israel, and involvement in the war in Iraq, was actively strengthening its defense capabilities. Iran has

oil and Belarus has military technology. The relationship was mutually beneficial.

¶9. (C) Although Alesin did not claim to have first-hand knowledge of Belarus' developing relationship with Iran, he was fairly certain that Iran is actively seeking military hardware in the CIS, particularly Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus. Iran has been trying to develop a surface to air missile defense and has various rockets, but has been unable to create a centralized control.

It also has an ailing air force of Russian MIGs and bombers that need upgrading. Alesin explained that Belarus has a military modernization industry that has had much experience in developing and centralizing a surface to air defense system and modernizing Russian equipment. After the fall of the Soviet Union, other CIS nations' infrastructure fell apart, but Lukashenko made sure it was preserved in Belarus, if not upgraded. The young specialists had all moved away, but the old timers were still around to continue developing and modernizing military technology. According to Alesin, Belarus had the knowledge Iran needed and Iran had what Belarus wanted - large oil deposits, nuclear energy development, and a market for Belarusian military technology.

Comment

¶10. (C) These agreements add somewhat more substance to a relationship greatly fostered by Lukashenko's dislike of "the West" and his comfort level for dealing with pariah states like Iran. By our reading, the bilateral agreements do not appear to contravene the recent UN Security Council resolution on Iran, but Belarus' military relationship with Iran is a sensitive topic in the international arena. Therefore, GOB authorities would prefer to keep it quiet. However, we expect the regime to widely publicize any specific energy or economic agreements, particularly if they occur during Ahmadinejad's upcoming visit to Minsk.
Stewart